

Social media and the spread of fake news in Nigeria: endSARS protest in perspective


Las redes sociales y la difusión de noticias falsas en Nigeria: la protesta de endSARS en perspectiva

Abstract: The last decade witnessed a massive twist in how information spread due to the advent of the internet and by extension the use of social media. Social media was used by Nigerian youths in 2020 to spread news and information concerning the activities of the Nigeria police unit responsible for anti-robbery operations (SARS) in the country, whom they accused of extortion, brutality and excessive use of force to quell crises. This later degenerated into a protest mostly in Abuja and Lagos with #ENDSARS slogan reverberating through social media. This study, therefore, was conducted to reveal how far was the social media used during the protest and to which extent was fake news circulated to fuel the crisis. A Descriptive survey research design was employed for the study where questionnaires in respect of the protest were generated and shared with 319 Nigerians to generate data. The result shows how social media was used to obtain first-hand information about the #ENDSARS movement which sometimes was enmeshed with fake news to draw sympathy for the protesters and turn citizens against the police and the Nigerian Government.

Keywords: Social media. Fake news. #EndSARS protest. Descriptive survey. Nigeria.

Resumen: La última década ha sido testigo de un gran cambio en la forma en que se ha difundido la información debido a la llegada de Internet y, por extensión, al uso de las redes sociales. Las redes sociales fueron utilizadas por los jóvenes nigerianos en 2020 para difundir noticias e informaciones sobre la actividades de la Unidad de Policía de Nigeria, responsable de las operaciones antirrobo (SARS) en el país, a quienes acusaron de extorsión, brutalidad y uso excesivo de la fuerza para enfrentar crisis. Más tarde, esto culminó en una protesta, principalmente en Abuja y Lagos, con el lema #ENDSARS, pidiendo el fin de la unidad de operaciones antirrobo, reverberando a través de las redes sociales. Este estudio, entonces, se llevó a cabo para revelar hasta qué punto las redes sociales fueron utilizadas durante la protesta y en qué medida se difundieron noticias falsas para alimentar la crisis. Para el estudio se utilizó un enfoque descriptivo, donde los cuestionarios relacionados con la protesta fueron creados y compartidos con 319 nigerianos para generar datos. El resultado muestra cómo se utilizaron las redes sociales para obtener información de primera mano sobre el movimiento #ENDSARS, que a veces estaba envuelto en noticias falsas para atraer simpatía para los manifestantes y poner a los ciudadanos en contra de la policía y el gobierno nigerianos.

Palabras clave: Redes sociales. Noticias falsas. Protestas #EndSARS. Investigación descriptiva. Nigeria.

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1 Introduction

More often than not, people do show their support or discontentment with government policies individually and or collectively in the exercise of their democratic right via different ways and means. Those who wish their voices to be heard do so via mass mobilisation of people in support of their cause. Compelling reasons and persuasion are necessary ingredients for mass mobilization and at the heart of this is the use of social media as a tool for sharing and dissemination of news and information. As a means of interaction, social media has become a handy platform for the mobilization of persons from various groups far and wide. The reliance on social media for news and information has permeated deep into the society of the 21st Century. Some of these social media outlets includes but not limited to; Facebook™, Twitter™, WeChat™, WhatsApp™, Snapchat™, Telegram™, Google™ among others. In the last decade, social media has been at the forefront of mass mobilization of people for or against government policies or their agents as demonstrated during the #Occupy Democrats, #Blacklives matters movement all in the US or the relentless sharing of pictures of the burning Amazon Rainforest in Brazil (ADETONA, 2019).

Nigeria, with a population of over 220 million people and active social media users of about 33 millions, present a unique opportunity for the citizens to use social media to engage one another and with the Government (AKINOLA; KAREN, 2021). While tremendous benefits are derived from the use of social media, they are largely unregulated platforms that could be easily exploited by criminals and non-state-actors. The ability of social media to generate online response real-time show the shrinking of government monopoly on the control of free speech. The widespread use and interconnected nature of these technologies have raised the desire of terrorists, rioters, fraudsters and other criminal elements to increasingly rely on the platforms for their activities. This interconnectedness not only affects how we link up with other people or do business but also how social media constitutes a threat to our personal privacy and security via the spread of fake and distorted news. Nigerians use social media to relay their grievances to the authorities as was the case during the EndSARS protest. The protest, which occurred in October 2020 and was directed at the Nigeria Police, was overwhelmingly covered by local and international media houses based on reports sent by those physically around the troubled areas. Information in the form of messages, pictures, audios and videos relating to the remote and immediate causes of the protest was shared to Nigerians via social media (UWAZURUIKE, 2020).

In the current dispensation, where social media generated content can be produced by individuals, the tendencies of fake and inaccurate news finding its way into society via social media are high. The kidnapping of the Chibok school girls and the subsequent hashtag movement that follows “#BringBackOurGirls” in 2014 was instructive. Fake news and misinforma-

tion were circulated using social media, which pitched the Government with the parents of the kidnapped school children. The 2018 Ebola outbreak in Nigeria also witnessed the spread of rumours relating to the possible prevention against the disease (TONYE, 2020). People were advised to bath with saltwater early in the morning as a possible cure. This led to the death of at least two persons due to excessive consumption of sodium chloride (TONYE, 2020). Another case in point was the chaos in Southeast Nigeria, where parents withdrew their children from schools based on social media stories accusing the Nigerian Army of using Phantom Monkey Pox Vaccine to kill school children, causing pandemonium (NWABUEZE; OKONKWO, 2018; OKON; EKPANG II, 2021). Of recent, the Covid19 pandemic was received by Nigerians with so much fake news about its origin, mode of transmission as well as possible medical therapy (NIGERIA, 2018). It is therefore necessary to query the basis of using social media by Nigerians during the EndSARS protest and to ascertain the extent to which fake news spread via social media.

During the EndSARS protest, youths, mostly from the Federal Capital Abuja and the commercial centre Lagos, moved to the street to voice their anger against perceived police injustice and brutality. While some claims by the protesters could be true, there are other unproven issues which were actively circulated using social media. It is against this backdrop that this research is centred toward assessing the role of social media in exacerbating the protest using fake news as a tool for mass mobilisation. The objective of the study is to find out the extent of the use of social media during the EndSARS protest, find out if fake news was deliberately circulated to gain support for the protest against the police and the Government.

Media Effect Theory and Technological Determinism Theory were used to get a clearer understanding of this study. Media Effect Theory focuses on the influence media has on many aspects of human life. According to Patti “Media influence is the actual force exerted by a media message, resulting in either a change or reinforcement in audience or individual beliefs” (VALKENBURG; OLIVER, 2020, p. 21-22). The Media Effect Theory comprises a group of theories that focused on the use of media in propaganda and persuasion. However, the theory that best situates this study is the Hypodermic Needle Theory which was propounded by “Harold Lasswell” (NWABUEZE; OKONKWO, 2018). The theory stressed that people are highly vulnerable to media messages and that the message would achieve its desired effects once it hit its targets irrespective of its authenticity. The uniqueness of this research work lies in its contrast with other publications on the same topic, which generally centred on the sharing of news and information without taking into cognisance how fake news could have played a pivotal role in shaping opinions and outcome of events. With earlier postulation about the use of social media in Nigeria to spread fake news, this research work therefore, looks into the possibility of using social media by Nigerians wittingly or unwittingly to amplify the EndSARS protest.

The study deployed a quantitative research method involving social media users on Facebook™, WhatsApp™ and Twitter™ platforms. An online closed-ended questionnaire through Google Forms was used to determine the views and ideas of users with regard to the research. The questionnaire was sent to participants via Facebook™, WhatsApp™ numbers and emails. The questionnaire survey was open from 6th to 13th August 2021. A total of 319 questionnaires were received and analysed using Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint tools. An important limitation to the study was the limited time frame and associated distance from the research area and place of research, which restricted data gathering to electronic means only. However, the work is augmented with other sources such as academic journals and accredited media houses reports.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Social Media

The advent of the internet brought a dramatic change in the way we receive and exchange information. The electronic mailing system paved the way for the use of social media as a tool for information sharing and dissemination. FASUNWON (2019), refers to social media as the novel information technology designed for communication between people. Social media has also been referred to digitally interactive system that aid in the creation and fast dissemination of information, views and ideas via online networking software (OBAR; WILDMAN, 2015). The complete control and seeming decentralisation of the way traditional information is collected and shared means that people have a potent tool to access a vast pool of data, be it videos, pictures and written material and quickly share via various social media interfaces at little cost. This also translated to the ability of individuals to make their voices heard from all corners of the globe concerning issues that affect them.

The speed and frequency of information dissemination using social media such as WhatsApp™, Twitter™ and Instagram™ outperformed that of the old traditional media outlets such as newspapers, radios and televisions. Social media also has the added advantage of instant reply to messages and live transmission of events, features that are severely lacking in the traditional media space (EKE-OKPALA; OMEKWU; MISS, 2014; EZEAH, 2013). Similarly, the ease at which people connect with one another such as families and friends, literally shrink the distance and break the barriers that separate them, which afford them the means to share and discuss issues of common interest irrespective of their geographical locations (OGHENETAGA; EJEDAFIRU, 2014).

2.2 Fake News

Fake news has been employed in the past as a means of propaganda to mislead opponents, especially during conflict. However, the phenomenon has been on the increase due to social media penetration in society. Academically, “fake news” is a combination of two separately distinct words “fake” and “news”. While “fake” refers to something not original/forged but intended to be presented and accepted as original/true, the term “news” signifies information about events and happenings (ADEKOYA, 2021). The combination of the two words “fake news” therefore refers to forged information created and presented as true. The basis behind most definitions of fake news is usually centred around the “intent”. MCGONAGLE (2017) defines fake news as deliberately fabricated news intended to be shared to mislead people into doubting verifiable facts. In all the aforementioned definitions of fake news, the main goal of those behind its spread is to create a delusional atmosphere to mislead their target audience with a clear mischief intent.

Of recent, fake news has drawn global attention due to its massive implication on democracy (ALLCOTT; GENTZKOW; YU, 2019). The persistent circulation of fake news has widened the gap between classes and further divide communities and societies (VARGO; GUO; AMAZEEN, 2018). It was reported that fake news was widely circulated during the 2016 US election claiming the endorsement of the Republican candidate Donald J Trump by Pope Francis, which led to serious confusion among the American voters (TANDOC JR; LIM; LING, 2018). Another fake news incident in 2016 was the purported online threat by the State of Israel to drop a nuclear bomb on the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, which cause apprehension in the Middle East (GOLDMAN, 2016). The possibility of political gladiators in Nigeria to explore the anger, confusion and economic hardship of the country to pitch one ethnic group with another for their political gain using fake news is very high (PATE; IBRAHIM, 2020). In 2018, the news of the killing of over 100 persons in Jos, Plateau State, was shared on social media as a retaliatory attack conducted by the Miyatti Allah Fulani group on Birom ethnic group. This piece of fake news further caused the death of several other innocent people despite the fact that it has nothing to do with Miyatti Allah (SADIKU; EZE; MUSA, 2018). Other instances of fake news shared on social media in Nigeria include; President Buhari’s rumoured death in 2017 and his marriage saga in 2019 and the claims of underage voting in the 2019 general elections in Northern Nigeria. These findings show the universal effect of fake news on communities and societies. This strengthens the need for fake news consciousness as a means of reducing and preventing the spread of fake news by the citizens.

2.3 Nigeria Police Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS)

The incessant attack on commuters and motorists in Lagos State, Nigeria's commercial centre, necessitated the Nigeria Police Force to establish the special anti-robbery squad popularly known as "SARS" in 1992 (MALUMFASHI, 2020). SARS personnel were specifically selected and specially trained to confront violent crimes such as armed robbery, kidnapping and thuggery. Their operation was usually conducted undercover, unchecked and unquestioned by the authorities (OLOYEDE; ELEGA, 2019). The "perceived" success of the unit's operations in Lagos saw the replication of similar units all over the country. However, within two decades of its establishment, Nigerians have mixed feelings about the SARS operation viz a viz its mandate.

SARS operatives were accused of several wrongdoings by the same people they were meant to protect. Report of extortion, corruption and even extrajudicial killings was on the rise against SARS (ADEPETUN, 2020). Many people became weary with the SARS operations and logged series of complaints to the police force headquarters with little or no success to addressing the problem (GEORGE, 2020). It was becoming obvious that the rationale behind the establishment of SARS was clearly defeated, and people were better off without them (AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, 2020).

2.4 #EndSARS Protest

The killing of a young man by SARS operative in Delta State South-south Nigeria on 20th October 2020 went viral on social media. Nigerians, took to the street to register their displeasure and requested for the complete disbandment of SARS with the "#EndSARS" slogan (AFRICA CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES, 2020). The international media houses were broadcasting live footage of the protest to their global audience. To douse tension and stop the protest from spiralling out of control, the Federal Government announced the immediate dissolution of SARS (OMONOBİ; AGBAKWURU; BRISIBE; G., 2020). However, disbanding of SARS was too small to appease the protester as they enumerated other demands that must be met by the Government before clearing the streets. The #EndSARS protest shares similarities with that of the #BlackLivesMatter, which was caused by the police killing of George Floyd on 26th May 2020, which was captured on video and shared via social media (EKOH; GEORGE, 2021).

EndSARS protest thus entered into days and attract global attention as world leaders and important personalities were identifying with the protesters and showing empathy via social media. Leaders such as the UN Secretary-General and United States Secretary of State used their Twitter handles in support of freedom of speech and peaceful protest (UWAZURUIKE, 2020). Similarly, the then-Democratic Presidential candidate Mr Biden, former US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, use Twitter hashtags in support of the protesters (LARNYOH, 2020; UWAZURUIKE, 2020). At home, the opposition party quickly mobilise massive support for the movement further fuelling and extending the crises to other areas.

2.5 Social Media and #EndSARS Movement

The speed of technological advancement and the increasing affordability of smart-phones brought about the spread of social media technology into the remotest parts of Africa and indeed Nigeria. Social media now serves as the backbone upon which Nigerians use for information sharing as well as mobilisation. This gives the EndSARS organisers and promoters the platform needed to organise rally remotely in different parts of the country. This was partly responsible for the initial success recorded by the protesters in terms of recognition, mobilisation and support. The protesters shared their location and called for support using Twitter™, WhatsApp™ and Facebook™ (KAZEEM, 2020). The protest thus, was able to register its digital presence both home and abroad, which give some disgruntled elements the power to manipulate digital contents to further fuel the crises. For instance, using social media, a popular actress Obianuju Catherine Ude popularly known as DJ Switch claimed to have witness killing of unarmed protesters by the Nigerian security forces, claim which she was unable to substantiate but further heated the polity. Similarly, a woman picture named Ugwu Blessing Ugochukwu was shared via Twitter claiming to have lost all her brothers to the SARS police, claim which her family lawyer debunked after some days, but the story was shared countlessly and drew sympathy for the protest and further aggravated the already bad situation. These fake stories encouraged other Nigerians who were alleged victims of police brutality in the past to share their experience on social media, calling for an end to SARS (OLOWOLAGBA, 2019). Video clips and pictures were mostly used by the protesters to share their stories as videos, pictures and images were easily manipulated and can pass a thousand messages depending on how they are framed and subsequently presented to the public (JAMIU, 2020).

Banks such as Guarantee Trust Bank™ and other cooperate organisation such as Oando™ gas station, Chicken Republic™, Bolt™ car hire services, flutter waves™ and **Rene™ supermarket** distributed various logistic items ranging from drinking water to food and offered 50% discount on taxi vehicle rides (DADA, 2020). Those who were not identifying with the protest were openly blackmailed online by the protesters or their political supporters (DADA, 2020). The social media companies also sided with the protesters as Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey launched a unique emoji in support of the EndSARS movement (UWAZURUIKE, 2020). In addition, social media was used to raise funds from Nigerians in the diaspora to support the movement. Digital platforms proved to be essential in funding the protest. Start-ups owned and operated by Nigerians was responsible for crowdfunding the movement, and it was estimated that around US\$380,000 was generated to support the protest (MALEFAKIS, 2021).

In another twist, the ProSARS group mobilised in support of the police unit and Government. The ProSARS shared video and pictures of the wanton vandalism of both Government and private properties by alleged EndSARS protesters. Pictures of slain security operatives were also shared on social media to show the extent of the protest and its atrocities. The Government claimed that hooligans used social media to indicate the location of foodstuff and relief materials meant for distribution to Covid19 infected areas. Numerous stores were pillaged all over the country with their content including the structures vandalised. The Inspector-General of Police claimed that social media was responsible for the deadly spread of the protest especially in Lagos and Abuja. Lagos state governor also attributed the chaos in the state to the spread of fake news using social media (ADEDIRAN, 2020).

Generally, one of the potent tools employed by both the protesters and the Government is the manipulation of news and information to win or discourage the protests. Thus, to outwit each other, all kinds of tactics were employed to distort the flow of genuine news to promote narratives and control public opinions. Both sides employed the use of social media in support of their cause with dire consequences. It is difficult to ascertain the true picture of events as both sides were accused of spreading fake news to further their goal. It was reported that 67 per cent of the source of fake news on EndSARS movement was shared by social media users (JAMIU, 2020). One of the fundamental components of any democracy is the press freedom and freedom of speech by individuals, which is globally becoming under serious threat by the incidence of fake news. Social media had been weaponized and is constantly fed with live bullets of fake news to the detriment of good social order and safety.

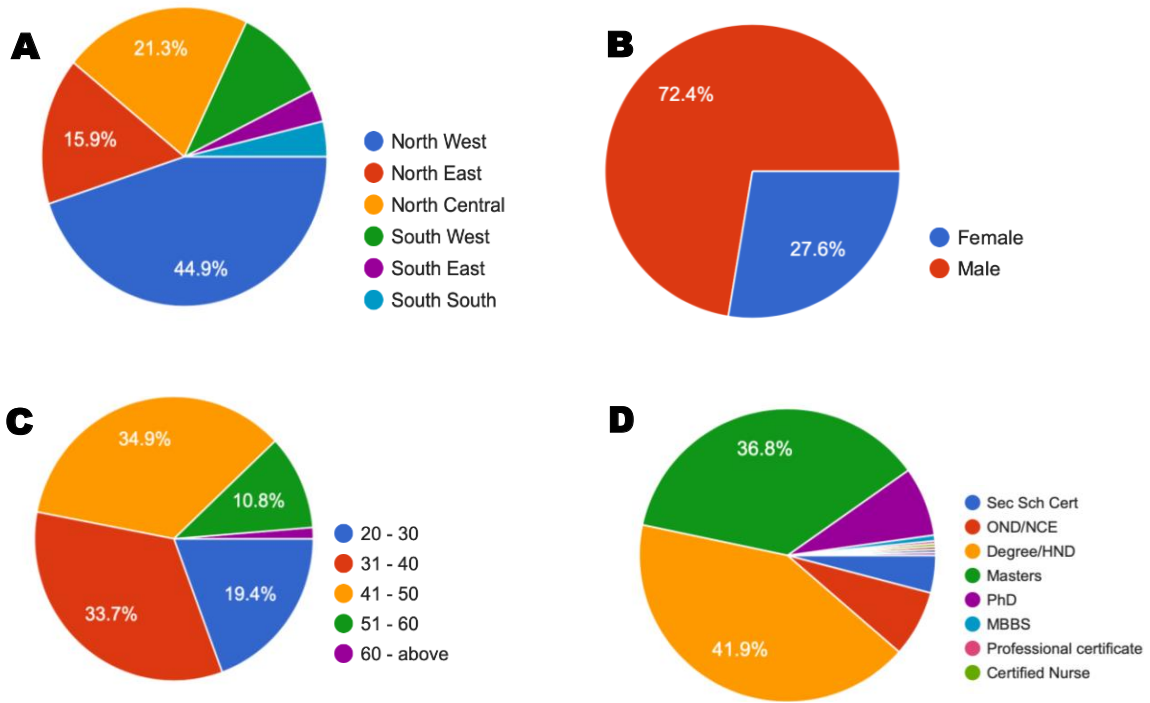
3 Data Presentation And Analysis

3.1 Demographic Evaluation

Based on political conveniences, Nigeria was divided into six geopolitical zones. The North East, North West and North Central all located in the Northern part of the country. While the South East, South West and South South are located in the Southern part of Nigeria. Out of the 319 responses received, 45%, 21.4% and 15.9% were from the North West, North Central and North East, respectively (**Graphic 1A**). Similarly, South West, South East and South South responded with 10.5%, 3.5% and 3.8%, respectively (**Graphic 1A**). The high percentage of respondents from the North is probably an indication of where the author comes from, as contact from phonebooks and emails were used to send out the questionnaire. Equally, 72.4% of the respondents were males, while females were 27.6% (**Graphic 1B**). Additionally, 88% of those who responded were between the ages of 20 to 50 years, and only 12% constitutes those from the ages of 51 and above (**Graphic 1C**). This is also an indication of the high number of Nigerian youths who are the most active on social media.

This finding also corroborate that of SAMUEL; STANLEY e OGECHUKWU (2019) who identify the majority of social media users in Nigeria as youths. The educational qualifications of the respondents show that, those with first degree and masters/PhD constitutes 86.3% (Graphic 1D). The educational background of the respondent was chosen to ensure that they are capable of making an informed decision while answering the questionnaires. The demographic distribution is summarised in the Graphic 1 below.

Graphic 1 – Showing demographic distribution (A), gender (B), age (C) and educational qualification of respondents (D).

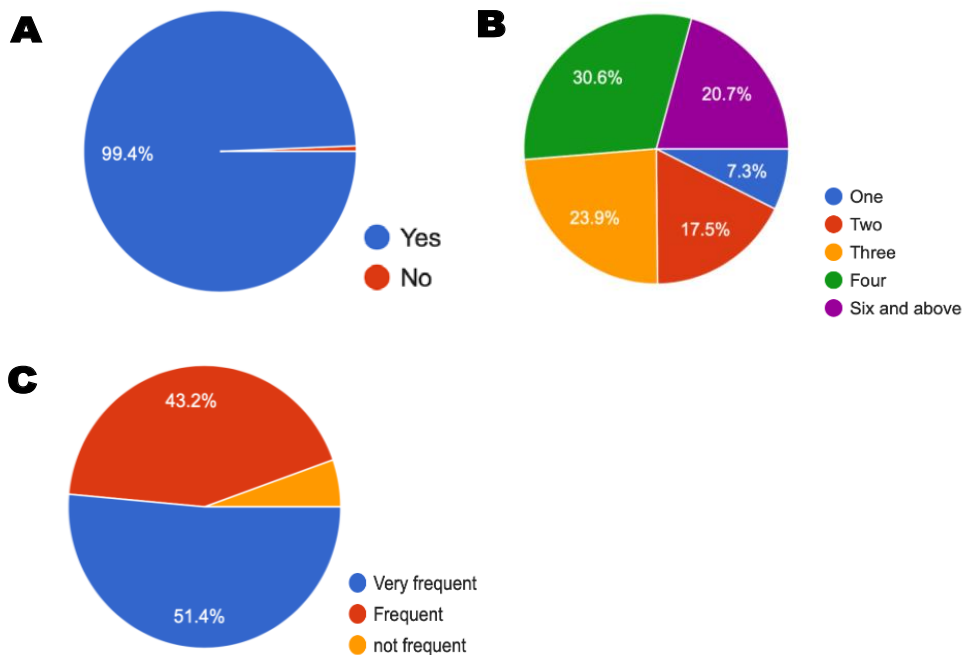


Source: The author (2021).

3.2 Social Media Participation

Based on the responses, the data suggest an active social media participation by the respondent at 99.4 % (**Graphic 2A**), with participants having more than one active social media application. The number of active social media applications by the respondents were; 7.3%, 17.5%, 23.9%, 30.6% and 20.7 for one, two, three, four and five applications respectively (**Graphic 2B**). Similarly, all those interviewed affirmed their active engagement with social media up to 94.6% (**Graphic 2C**).

Graphic 2 – Showing social media participation by the respondents (A), those with more than one social media application (B), and frequency of engagement with the social media (C).

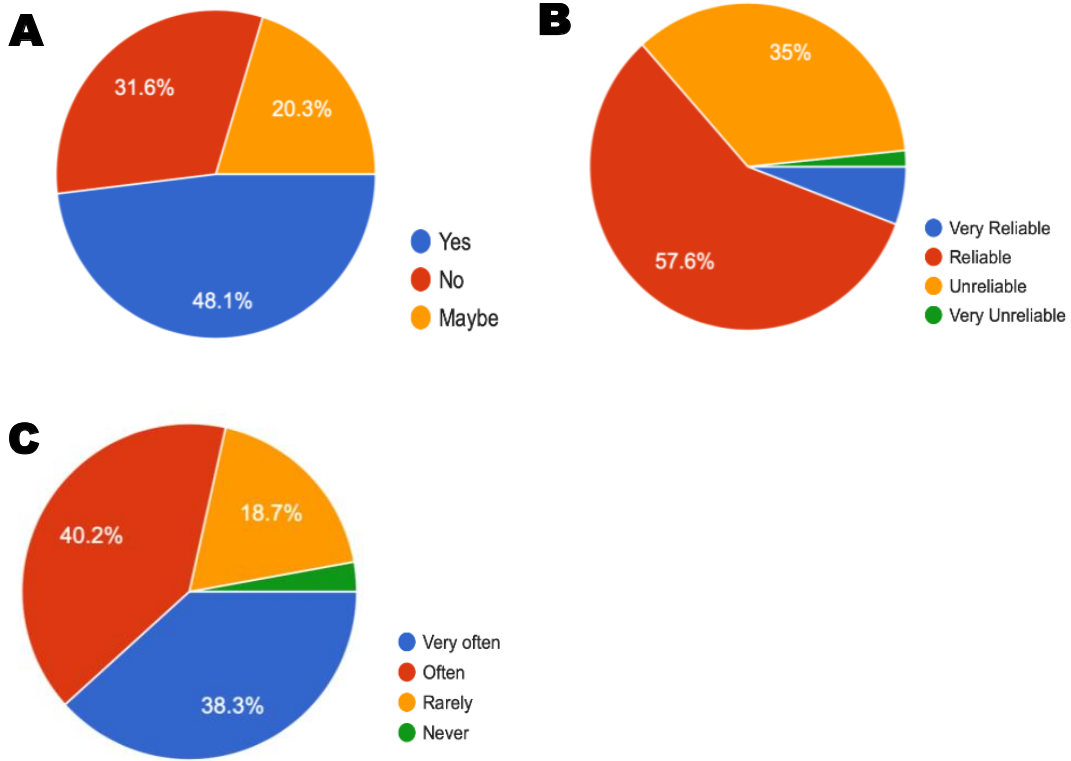


Source: The author (2021).

3.3 Reliance on Social Media for News and Information

The ease at which we move around with an internet-enabled smart mobile phones makes it easier to get connected with social media to obtain news as they break. 48.1 % of the respondents rely on social media for their news and information (**Graphic 3A**). However, they all differ on how accurate and reliable is the information they obtain. While 57.6 % affirmed the reliability of such information/news, 35% says the news is usually unreliable as such cannot be trusted (**Graphic 3B**). Some participants also go the extra length to verify the news they received from social media through other means. 78.5% claim to always verify the news they received, while 21.5% never cared to do so (**Graphic 3C**).

Graphic 3 – Showing respondent’s reliance on social media for news and information (A), the reliability of such news and or information (B), and the frequency of verifying such news and information with other sources (C).

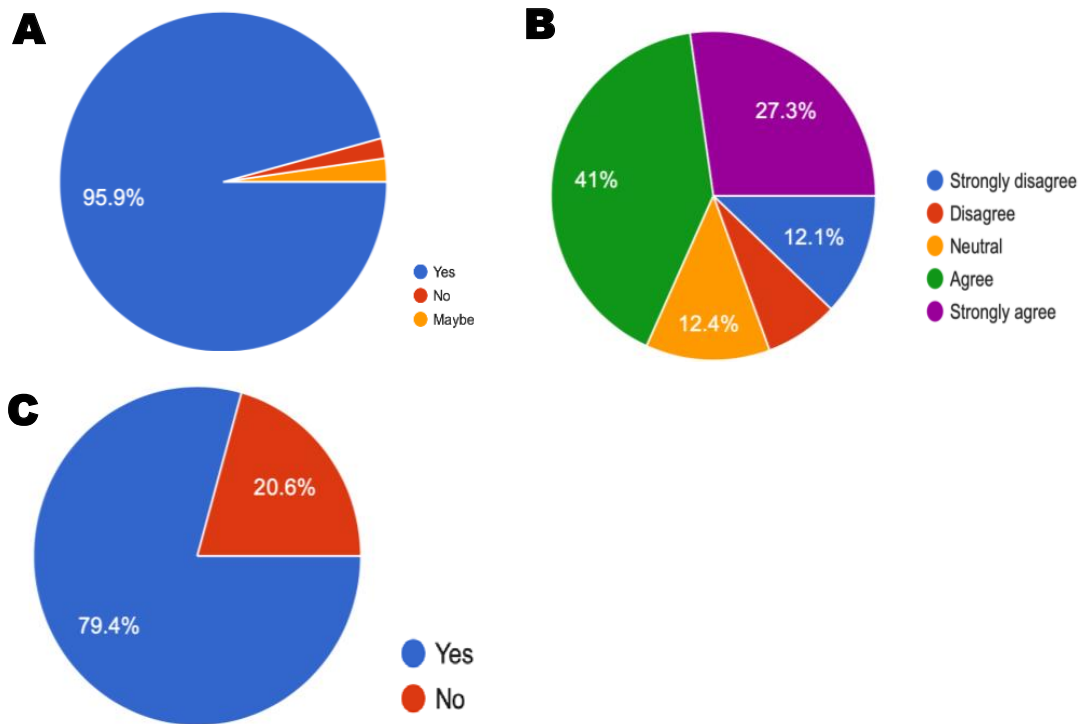


Source: The author (2021).

3.4 Potential of Social Media to Spread Fake News

Those who claimed to verify social media news reported encountering misinformation and fake news entrapped within social media posts, with 95.9% of the respondent affirming that they had encountered fake news in social media (**Graphic 4A**). 68.3% of the participants agreed that misinformation and fake news is capable of exacerbating insecurity in Nigeria, while 19.3% disagree and 12.4% were neutral (**Graphic 4B**). To reduce the potential of using social media to cause chaos, 79.4% of the respondents were in favour of regulating social media by the Government, while 20.6% think otherwise (**Graphic 4C**).

Graphic 4 – Showing respondent’s encountering fake news and misinformation within social media posts (A), the possibility of such fake news to exacerbate insecurity in Nigeria (B), and the respondents’ views on the regulation of social media by the Government (C).

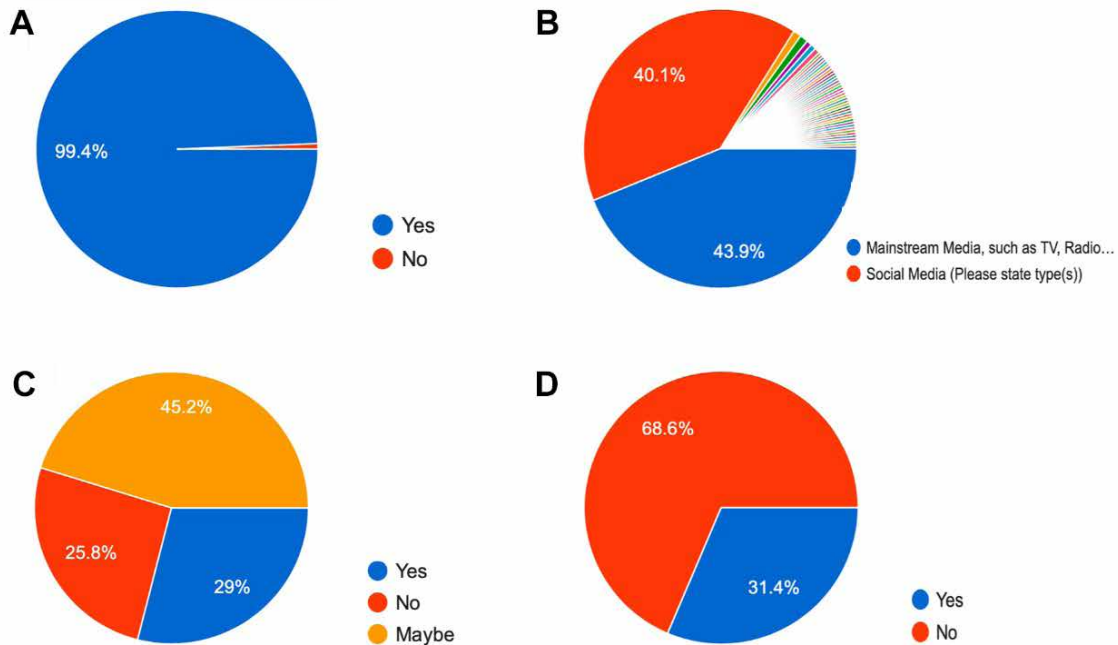


Source: The author (2021).

3.5 The Spread of the EndSARS Protest News on Social Media

Due to its wide publicity and coverage almost all those interviewed, 99.4% have had about the EndSARS protest, irrespective of their geographical locations (**Graphic 5A**). This finding is also in agreement with the work of OKON e EKPANG II (2021) who recorded high reliance on social media for news and information by Nigerians. 56.1% of the sample population were receiving update on the EndSARS protest through social media compared to 43.9% who get updated via the mainstream media (**Graphic 5B**). However, not all update on the protest was accurate. 29% said the update was accurate, while 25.8% said it wasn't accurate, 45.2% were undecided (**Graphic 5C**). 31.4% of the respondents were actively involved in restoring law and order during the protest, which makes them eyewitness to events and the ability to compare and contrast the news and information they received via social media vis a vis what is happening on the ground (**Graphic 5D**).

Graphic 5 – Showing respondent’s knowledge about the EndSARS protest (A), the means by which the respondents get an update about the EndSARS protest (B), the accuracy of the update obtained via social media (C) and the number of respondents who were actually involved in restoring law and order during the protest (D).



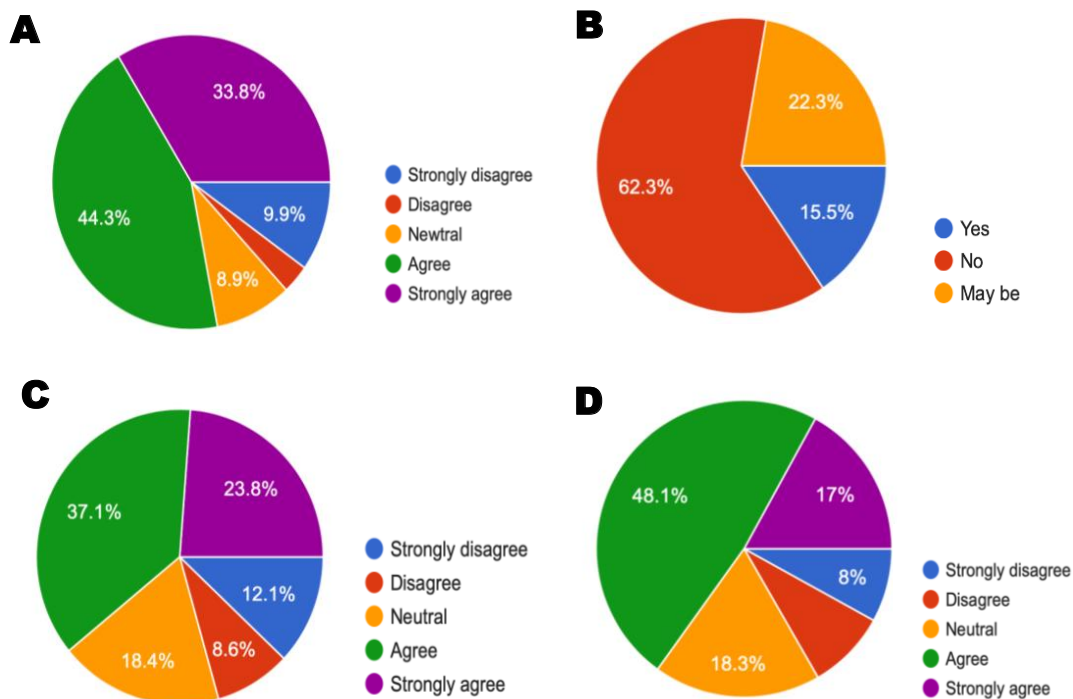
Source: The author (2021).

3.6 Using Social Media to Circulate Fake News During the EndSARS Protest

As mentioned in the literature review, many authors reported the inclinations of people to use social media to spread fake news. Additionally, Nigerians are notorious in using social media to mislead people especially during elections, with the aim of influencing voters’ choice (OKON; EKPANG II, 2021). Similarly, the Hypodermic Needle theory upon which this Research work is based adduced that people tend to believe whatever form of news and or information passed to them and could have tremendous impact on how they behave afterwards. The data obtained from this study also suggest the potential of fake news spread via social media. 78.1% of the respondents agreed that fake news was circulated during the EndSARS protest (**Graphic 6A**). Similarly, 62.3% of the survey were of the opinion that people reported the protest with prejudice (**Graphic 6B**). It is also evident that

social media users deviated from the initial goal of using social media for mobilisation but rather directing criminals to warehouses to loot Covid19 relief materials (**Graphic 6C**). It is also adduced from the survey (68.75%, not included in the Figure below) that the violent outcome of the protest, especially in Abuja and Lagos were fuelled by the spread of unverifiable news, which fans the anger of both parties to commit acts of wanton destruction to public and private properties. Finally, 65.1% of the respondents believed that the social media pressure mounted on the Government in respect of the activities of the SARS was responsible for scrapping the police unit (**Graphic 6D**).

Graphic 6 – Views of the respondents on the circulation of fake news in social media about the EndSARS protest (A), this shows the percentage of what respondents believe the EndSARS protest was reported with bias (B), the satisfaction that social media was used to mislead protesters to deviate from the EndSARS protest (C) and the number of respondents who believed that the pressure of protesters from the social media was responsible for banning the SARS police unit (D).



Source: The author (2021).

4 Summaries Of Findings And The Way Forward

This study clearly shows the interaction between social media and the actors of the EndSARS movement, especially from the protest organisers. This also is in line with many other research work which reported the use of social media during crises or unrest (OKORO; EMMANUEL, 2018). It was also reported by ONALEYE (2020) that, at the beginning of the EndSARS protest, many Nigerians resort to using social to keep abreast of the happening. As earlier discussed, social media serves as an avenue where citizens share their views and information thus, the highhandedness of the SARS was widely circulated using social media. A similar finding was also reached by OKON e EKPANG II (2021) who opined that national and international issues are easily reported and shared via social media. Other researchers also agreed that social media was used for mobilisation and sensitisation against certain government policy that are inimical to the society (ONALEYE, 2020; SHAW, 2016). Videos, pictures and audio recordings were used to report on the excesses of the police brutality to Nigerians and the world at large. This, as adduced by the respondents, was partly responsible for disbanding the SARS unit. Respondent believed that social media such as Facebook™, Instagram™, Twitter™ were also employed to direct protesters to predetermine places and locations away from security agencies to continue their protest unabated. The #EndSARS handle on Twitter™ was among the world most trending and undoubtedly the highest in Nigeria. This, with other remote issues, were probably responsible for the banning of Twitter™ by the Nigerian Government in Jun 2021, a move which about 72% of the respondent applauded.

On the issues of fake news and its circulation on social media during the EndSARS protest, the study shows an overwhelming agreement among respondents that fake news was widely spread on social media. The study could not ascertain if the fake news was intentionally or erroneously circulated to sway public opinion. However, there are evidences to prove that some of the circulated images were deliberately reconfigured and tailored “at lease by the originators” with intent to draw sympathy and turn the population against the police and indeed the Government. The lady who was claimed to have lost her brothers to police brutality, the fake shopping mall incident, the endorsement of the protest by the Catholic bishops of Nigeria are instructive in this regard (MWAI, 2020). This research differs from that of ADEKOYA (2021) where they could not link deliberate distortion of news and or information with the EndSARS protest. They claimed that fake news was indeed circulated during the protest with no intention to cause harm or sway public opinion.

The aforementioned issues bring to fore the dangers of unregulated social media by any nation or society. The National Assembly passed the Prohibition of Frivolous Petitions and Other Related Matters Act 2017 this however, failed to check the spread of fake and dangerous contents over the social media (SAMUEL; STANLEY; OGECHUKWU, 2019). While acknowledging the efforts by the legislators to draft and pass the social media bill, a concerted effort must be put in place by the state to check the misuse of social media to cause chaos. Some segments of the population are against social media regulation as they claim it is against the freedom of speech, they however, advocate for fact-checking and societal awareness on the dangers of social media misuse.

This also reinforces the need for digital literacy to equip society with the necessary skill for verifying news and information with other reliable news outlets or refutable organisations.

It is our responsibility to be on the lookout of news that are fake and could be injurious to the society. Some ways to ascertain the genuineness of a news include evaluating the news sources and consulting expert (SADIKU; EZE; MUSA, 2018). Evaluating means, scrutinising news sources based on their pedigree, authors credence, crosschecking with other sources, dates and locations as well as reliability of other previous news published by the same source. Fake news can also be recognised by consulting experts, such as fact-checking websites such as FactCheck.org, Snopes.com, PolitiFact.com, and ProTruthPledge.org or subject matter experts (SADIKU; EZE; MUSA, 2018). Once a news failed this litmus test avoid circulating such news. After identification it is our responsibility, the mainstream media and the Government to also fight the menace of fake news. This could be through media literacy which give an individual the ability to separate facts from opinions. Factchecking organisations in conjunction with social media giants could also weigh in to identify and clarify news that are fake. Artificial intelligence could also be deployed by social media tech to detect fake news using algorithms. The employment of third part mediators (social, legal, and economic) could also reduce the spread of fake news (SADIKU; EZE; MUSA, 2018). Social mediators could include the press, academics and activist. Legal mediators such as law and government enforcement agencies as well as economic mediators such as the social media and their clients could sanction fake news defaulters to sanitise the social media. Most importantly, people should severely be held responsible for the content they generate or share that is injurious to national security.

Nigeria with a population of 220 million is ethnically and religiously divided mostly according to the geopolitical zones of the country. There has been an endemic mistrust between these ethnically and religiously divided people which was responsible for the Nigeria Civil War in the 60s. The permeation of social media into the nooks and crannies of Nigeria has again exposed this ugly monster of division. The elite and politicians are taking advantage of this fracture to further fuel anger and mistrust between the predominantly Muslim North and the predominantly Christian South. Secessionist in the South East and South West are constantly using social media to call for the fragmentation of the Country. The farmers herders clash and the ethnoreligious fight in the Middle belt states is aggravated using the social media. For the continuous existence of the Nigerian State, it is imperative for the Government to implement the available regulations as regard social media usage in the Country and these regulations should be reviewed from time to time as the need arises to stop the country from sliding into anarchy.

5 Conclusions

This research work has demonstrated the role social media played in the EndSARS protest of October 2020 in Nigeria. It shows how youths of the ages between 20 to 50 years use their mobile phones to obtain news and information about the origin, remote and immediate causes of the protest. It also shows the deliberate spread of distorted or half-truth to cause panic and apprehension in society, which sometimes leads to loss of lives and properties. Social media can be regarded as a double-edged sword depending on how it is employed and used. While some Nigerians used it to further their hidden agenda, some employed the online tool to express their opinions and make their voices heard, which in this instance, resulted in the disbandment of the SARS police unit. Additionally, the protest had proved the power of social media as a tool for massive mobilisation and awareness that cannot be tamed by the Government or its agencies but which call for regulation to provide sanctity against abuse and misuse. It is also important for the tech giants such as Twitter™, Facebook™ and WhatsApp™ to be more active and purposeful in using technology and algorithm to detect and remove harmful content in their platforms. They should also invest in social media awareness as part of their community public relation, for people to easily identify and report fake or inaccurate news.

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